

5. PLACE: NATURAL ENVIRONMENT – Open Space and Recreation

OVERVIEW

This document provides information on Amherst's open space and recreation resources. After this overview section, the document is organized into the following sections:

- **Key Findings** – The key findings represent a summary of important conclusions drawn by the consulting team based on research and discussions with the CPC and Town Staff.
- **Detailed Information** – This section includes the background documentation for the key findings. It addresses Amherst's open space resources, trails and greenways, and recreational facilities.

A variety of sources were used in the preparation of this document. The Town's own plans and studies informed the majority of this chapter, especially the *Amherst Comprehensive Planning Study: Defining Village Boundaries and Open Space Preservation Strategies*, and the *Town of Amherst Community Development Plan*. Internet research was conducted to gather additional information. It is important to note that although the studies reviewed to prepare this chapter contain solid analysis and clear recommendations, none of these studies were adopted as public policy by the Town.

Please note that maps in this document have been formatted to fit 8 ½ x 11 inch paper and are not to scale.

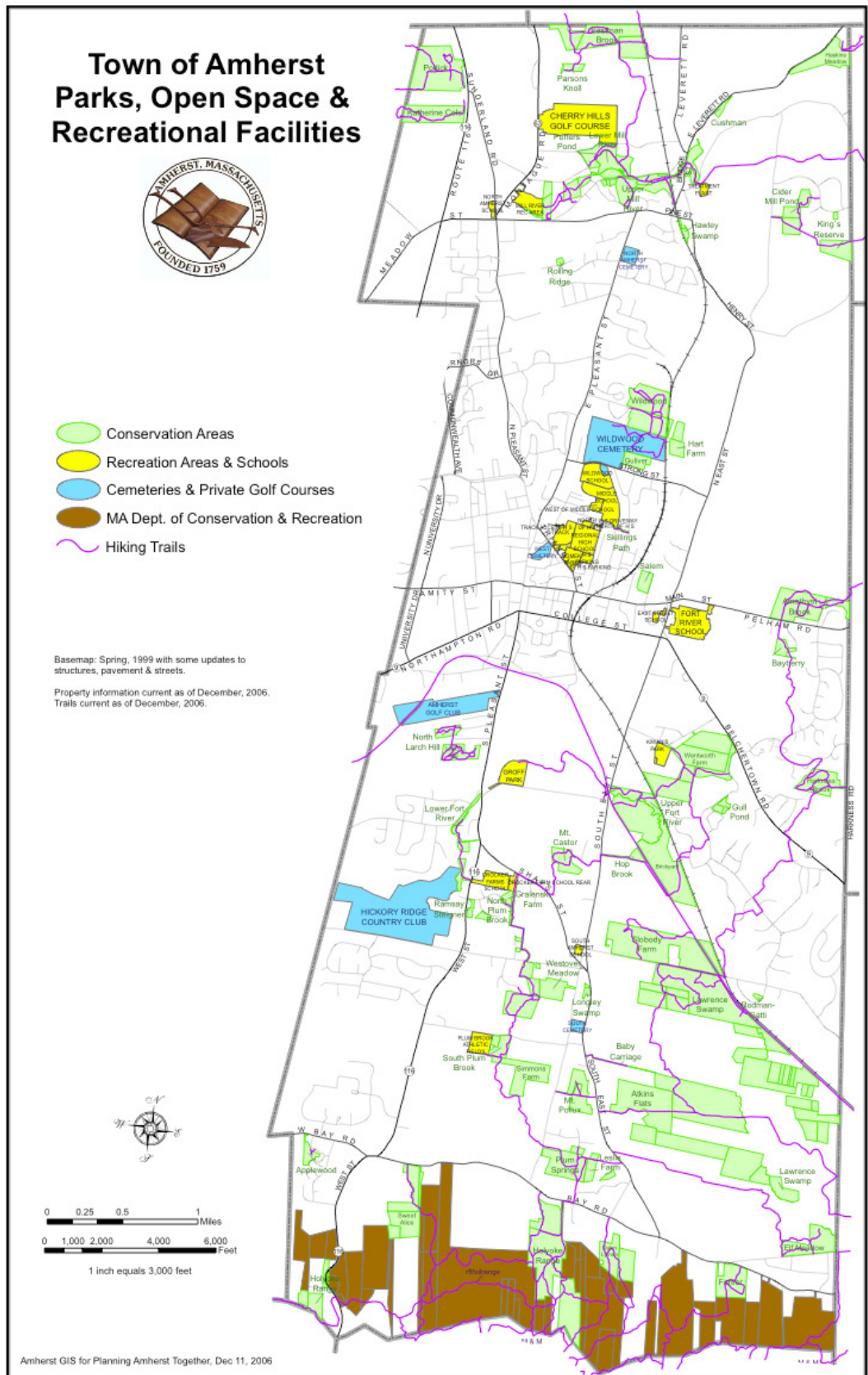
KEY FINDINGS

1. Amherst has an extensive network of parks, open space, and recreational resources.
2. The Town of Amherst has 4,849.5 acres of permanently protected land, representing 27.3 percent of its total land area. It actively plans for the conservation of additional open space lands.
3. A total of 1,841 acres of farmland in Amherst (representing 10.4 percent of total land area) have been preserved using Agricultural Preservation Restrictions (APR).
4. Amherst has been acquiring conservation lands since 1963. The 2003 Draft Open Space Plan identifies four priority areas for continued conservation efforts – Pulpit Hill, the Cushman Brook green belt, the Plum Brook green belt, and the Holyoke Range.
5. The trail system in Amherst and adjacent communities is over 80 miles in length. It is comprised of about 50 different trails that accommodate a variety of different users. The Town's Department of Conservation manages the trail system.
6. The Pioneer Valley region boasts numerous natural areas and outdoor recreational resources.
7. Amherst's Leisure Services and Supplemental Education Department coordinates a wide range of classes and recreational activities.

DETAILED INFORMATION**Amherst has an extensive network of parks, open space, and recreational resources.**

Map 5.1 on the following page depicts the Town's existing parks, open space, and recreational resources. It highlights conservation areas that are owned by the Town, recreation areas and schools, cemeteries and private golf courses, and lands in the Mount Holyoke Range State Park that are managed by the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation. The map also depicts the system of hiking trails that traverse the Town.

MAP 5.1: PARKS, OPEN SPACE, AND RECREATIONAL FACILITIES



Source: Town of Amherst

The Town of Amherst has 4,849.5 acres of permanently protected land, representing 27.3 percent of its total land area. It actively plans for the conservation of additional open space lands.

The Amherst community clearly values its open space resources. In addition to the parks, open space, and recreational facilities highlighted on Map 5.1, the Town has numerous other types of protected land. The Town has 4,849.5 acres of protected land (see Map 5.2 on the next page). Some of these areas are open to public use and recreation; others are set aside to preserve views and the agricultural economy.

Permanently protected land consists of Town conservation areas, Agricultural Preservation Restriction land (APR), recreation areas and schools, private land trusts, conservation restrictions, Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation land, and Subdivision open space. The 2003 Draft Open Space Plan (as excerpted by the May 2004 Community Development Plan) describes Amherst's current philosophy regarding open space preservation. (See sidebar at left.)

The Town has a number of growth regulations and other policies that contribute towards planning and preserving open space. It encourages the preservation of farmland and conservation lands in outlying areas. The Town also seeks to direct new growth towards existing developed areas in order to alleviate development pressure in open space corridors, as well as reduce the need for expanding Town services and amenities. These efforts are designed to help maintain the existing development pattern in which village development is separated by open spaces.

A total of 1,841 acres of farmland in Amherst (representing 10.4 percent of total land area) have been preserved using Agricultural Preservation Restrictions (APR).

In Amherst, agricultural land is often preserved using Agricultural Preservation Restrictions (APR – see sidebar at left). Map 5.2 depicts these lands.

At the time the 2003 Draft Open Space Plan was prepared there were 32 APRs in place in Amherst, totaling 1,841 acres. Funding for APRs comes from a combination of sources, including state and federal funds issued through the Department of Agricultural Resources and donated funds from regional land trusts (such as Valley Land Fund and Kestrel Trust). Occasionally a limited number of lots are sold off for development in order to reach the appraised values of the APR.

The 2003 Draft Open Space Plan recommends seven areas as being high priority for this type of protection. The proposed areas contain parcels owned by a variety of different property owners representing 16 potential APRs. The size of the parcels varies widely from the 20-acre Andrews-LaVerdiere property along Meadow Street to the 200-acre Hampshire College Farm property on West Street. (*Source: p.OSP-6*).

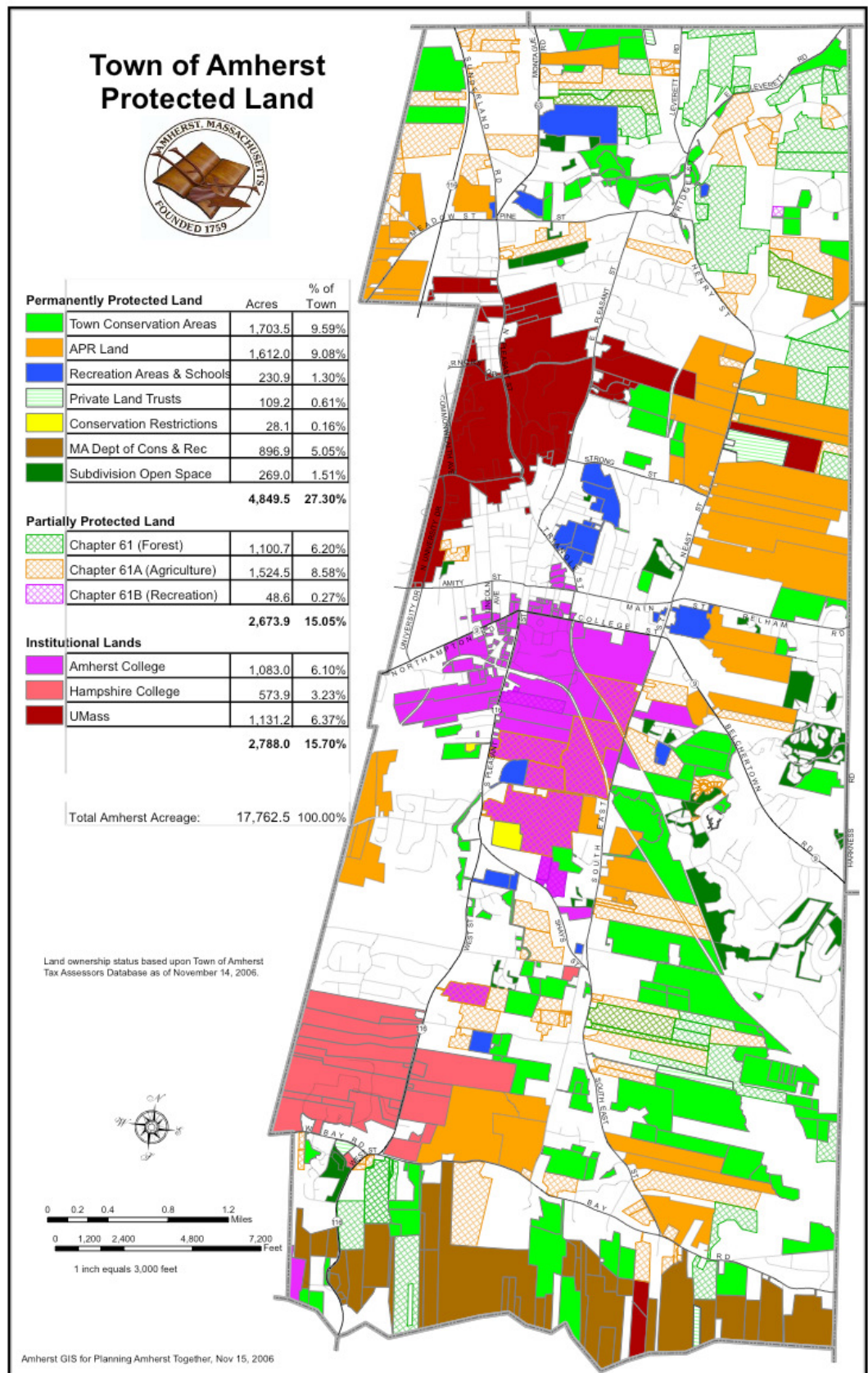
"Open Space should be not just the space left over after development but space actively planned to contribute to the character and quality of the Town's total environment, and to ensure the continued existence of a "critical mass" of land area needed to sustain traditional resource-based economic activities and recreation."

2003 Draft Open Space Plan

Agricultural Preservation Restriction Program (APR)

Farmers can face pressure to sell their land for development. The APR program addresses this issue by paying farmers the difference between the "fair market value" and the "agricultural value" of their farmland. In exchange for this payment, the land is placed under a permanent deed restriction, which precludes any uses that would hinder the land's agricultural viability. The program is administered by the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (www.mass.gov/agr/landuse/APR).

MAP 5.2: TOWN OF AMHERST PROTECTED LAND



Source: Town of Amherst

Amherst has been acquiring conservation lands since 1963. The 2003 Draft Open Space Plan identifies four priority areas for continued conservation efforts – Pulpit Hill, the Cushman Brook green belt, the Plum Brook green belt, and the Holyoke Range.

Since 1963 the Town has been acquiring conservation land to protect blocks of green space and wildlife habitat. Town conservation areas total 1,703.5 acres (9.59% of the total area of the Town of Amherst).

The Conservation Department currently manages 1,965 acres of land, including more than 40 open fields, and has been involved in the acquisition of land for Agricultural Preservation Restrictions and Conservation Restrictions (*source: Town of Amherst Conservation Department website*). The 2003 Draft Open Space Plan recommends that the Town complete open space blocks, protecting land either via fee purchase or Conservation Restrictions. The Plan identifies four areas as being high priority for open space conservation efforts including Pulpit Hill, the Cushman Brook green belt, the Plum Brook green belt, and the Holyoke Range.

In preparation for undertaking a comprehensive planning process, the Town contracted the University of Massachusetts Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning (DLARP) to work on three components of the plan – open space and viewshed protection, defining village boundaries, and designing village centers. The study was completed in May 2004, and provides detailed analyses of open space priorities in North Amherst, Amherst Center, and South Amherst. It found that gaps in open space corridors need to be addressed, specifically citing the critical habitat and scenic views along the Mill River corridor, Fort River corridor, and Holyoke Range. Map 5.2 on the previous page depicts Amherst’s protected land while Maps 5.3 and 5.4 on the following pages illustrate the draft open space plan and open space protection priorities identified in past planning efforts.

What is a viewshed?

A viewshed is the area within view from a defined observation point or corridor.

What is viewshed protection?

A community can try to protect rural character and scenic views by identifying and mapping important viewsheds and scenic views from key scenic roads, public parks, and other locations valued by a community. The municipality may adopt ordinances, or work with landowners and developers, to design development so as to minimize impacts on important viewsheds. Since scenic views often cross municipal borders, scenic viewshed protection efforts can benefit from regional cooperation.

The study bases its protection priorities on criteria related to scenic quality, habitat preservation, and connectivity of the open space network. The DLARP study recommends several strategies for preserving Amherst’s open space and rural character while allowing for continued development. It recommends that policy changes be made to reduce barriers to infill development. It suggests that by defining village boundaries and managing growth in existing village centers Amherst could reduce development pressures in open space corridors and maintain the Town’s traditional development patterns. It also recommends a Viewshed Protection overlay district, which could limit vegetation removal, prohibit building on steep slopes and at high elevations, and require design review to assess the impact of new structures on viewplanes.

MAP 5.3: OPEN SPACE PLAN

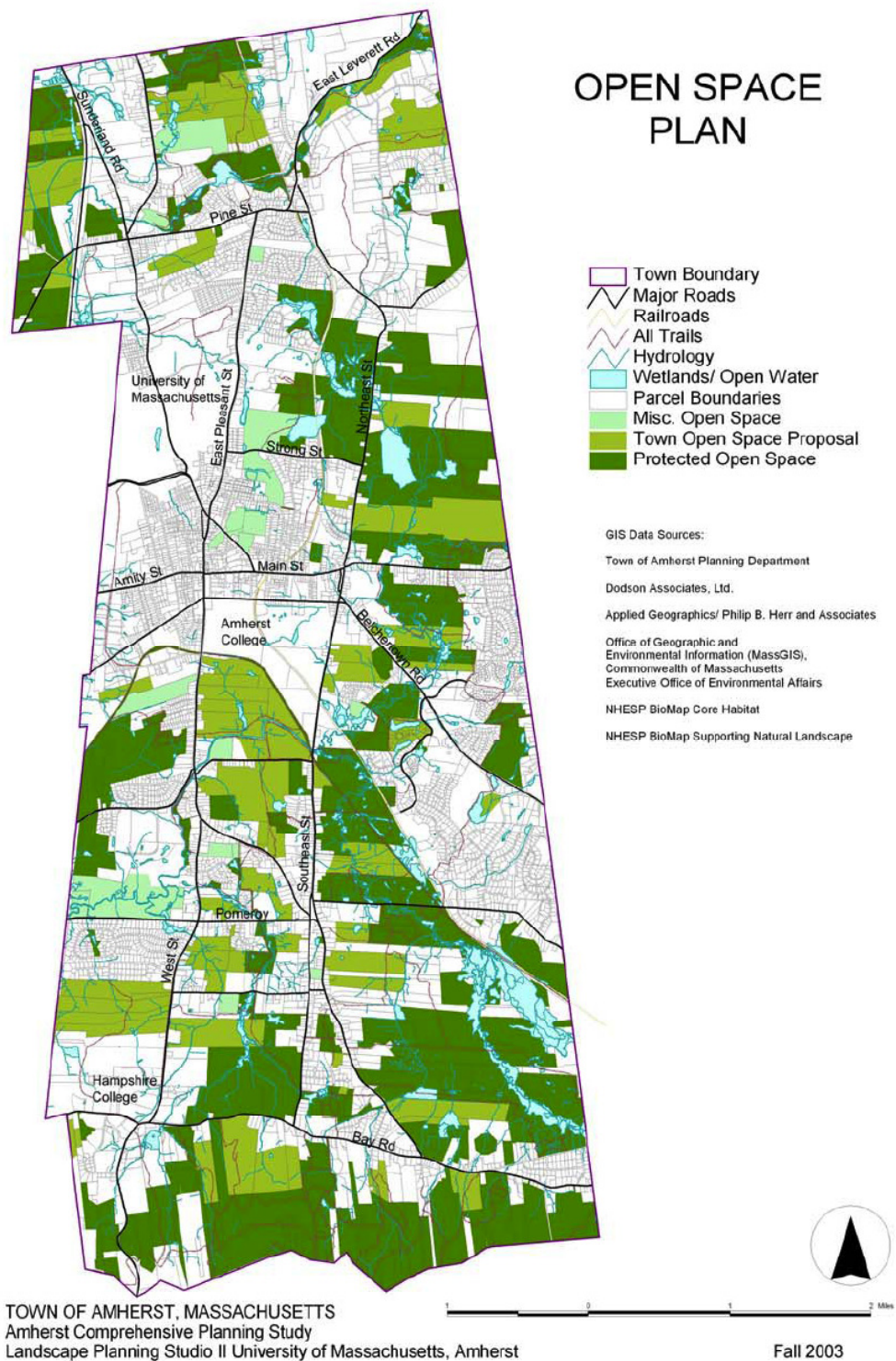


Figure 2.1: Lands in existing and proposed protection

Source: Amherst Comprehensive Planning Study: Defining Village Boundaries & Open Space Preservation Strategies

MAP 5.4: OPEN SPACE PROTECTION PRIORITIES

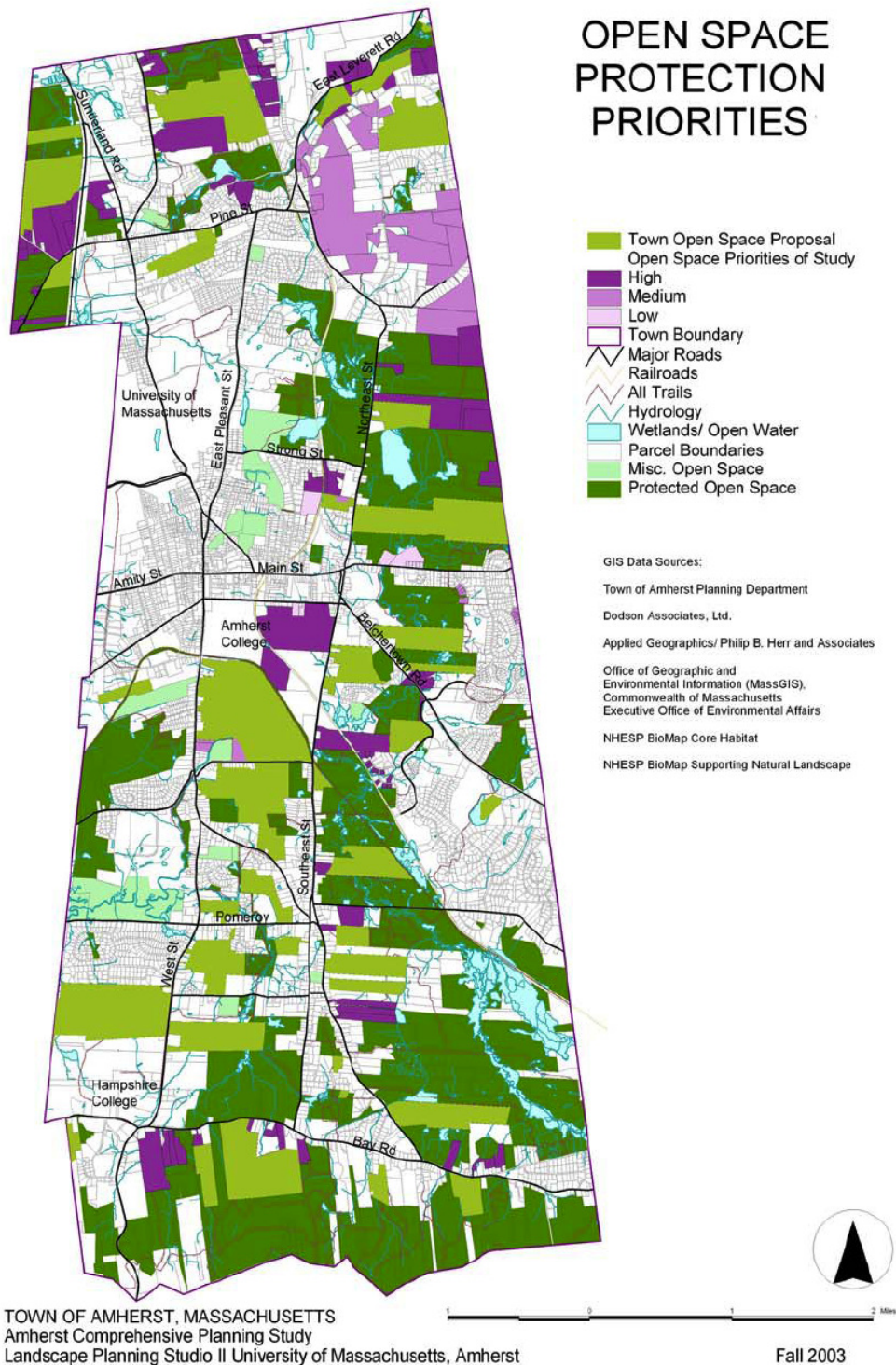


Figure 2.21: Town Proposed and Study Recommendations for Priority Protection

Source: Amherst Comprehensive Planning Study: Defining Village Boundaries & Open Space Preservation Strategies

Amherst's Trail System

Amherst's Conservation Commission sets goals for improving the trail system. The Draft Open Space Plan – found in the May 2004 Community Development Plan – outlines a number of goals including: encouraging access without the need to drive; providing connections to schools; promoting diversity in trails (long, short, out-and-back, looping, etc); enhancing access to nature while limiting impacts on wildlife; and developing a universal access trail system that is accessible to people with disabilities.

The trail system in Amherst and adjacent communities is over 80 miles in length. It is comprised of about 50 different trails that accommodate a variety of different users. The Town's Department of Conservation manages the trail system.

Amherst and adjacent communities have an extensive trail system comprised of about 50 different trails. These trails are primarily used by pedestrians, but some can also accommodate cross-country skiers, mountain bikers, and horseback riders. The system is over 80 miles in length, including extensions into adjacent towns. Over 150 roadside trailheads make the system easy to access.

The Town's Conservation Department maintains the trail system, with considerable help from volunteer trail adopters, summer AmeriCorps crews, Department of Environmental Management grants, and others. The trail system extends into many adjacent towns and includes the 42-mile Robert Frost Trail, the 6-mile KC Trail, and many shorter paths. Two new trails were dedicated in November 2002 –the Houston-Gage trail (a 1.7 mile looping trail above Dean Brook), and the one mile Walt Whitman Trail. Ongoing activities include improving existing trails to enhance access for people with disabilities, and establishing a Literary Trail System by naming trails after authors and poets affiliated with the Amherst community.

(Source: <http://www.amherstma.gov/departments/Conservation/trails.asp>)

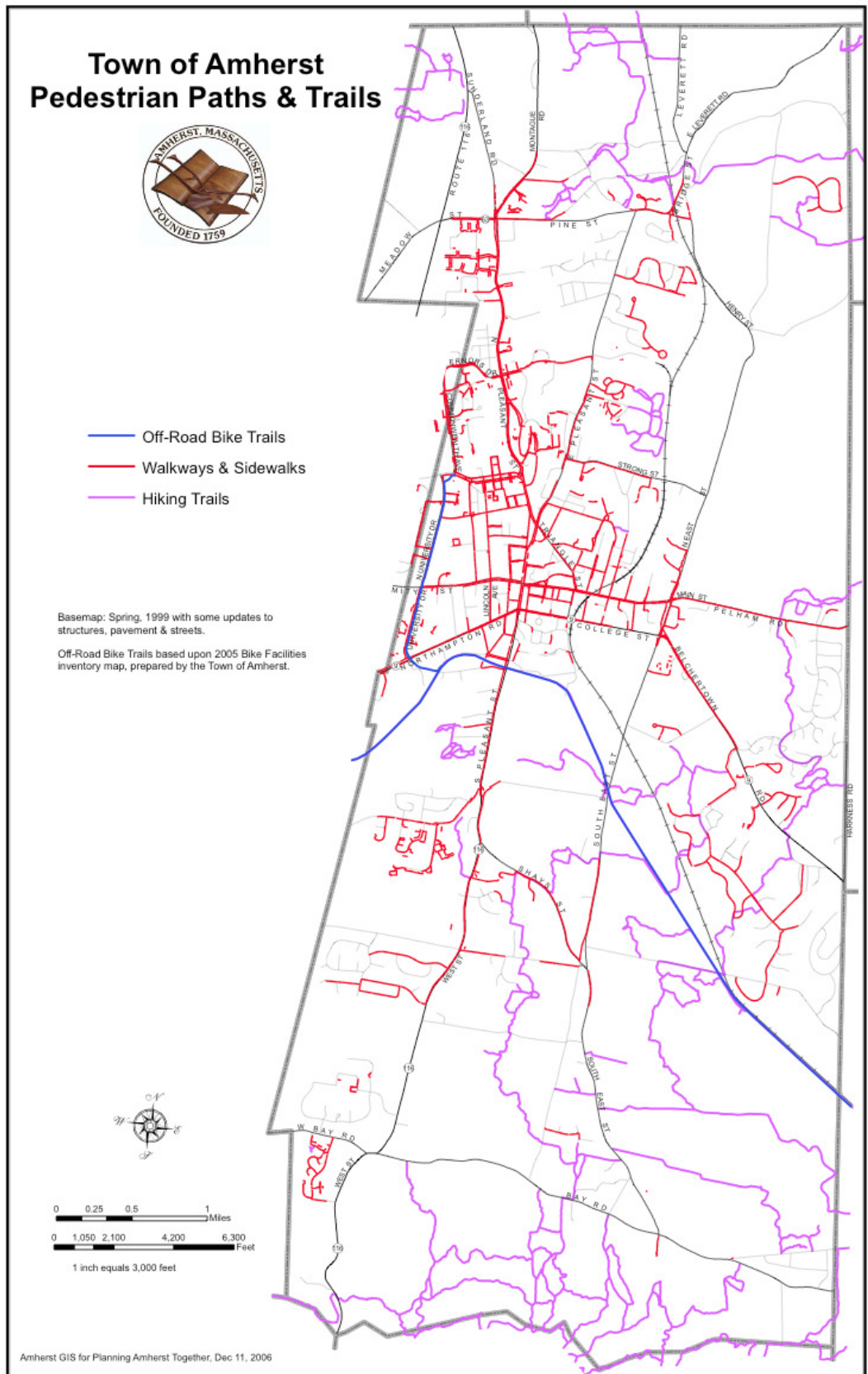
Map 5.5 on the following page shows Amherst's system of pedestrian paths and trails; hiking trails are highlighted in purple.

The Pioneer Valley region boasts numerous natural areas and outdoor recreational resources.

The Pioneer Valley in which Amherst is located offers many opportunities for nature appreciation and outdoor recreation such as fishing, hunting, birding, wild food gathering, camping, hiking, skiing, boating, and cycling. These recreational activities and traditional uses of this preserved land have long been a culturally significant part of the region's history. A recreation guide found at www.amherstguide.com highlights some of the major outdoor recreation resources in the region, including numerous natural areas and trails. Key resources include:

- Holyoke Range
- Metacombet-Monadnock Trail (the M-M), a 98-mile trail which cuts through the Pioneer Valley and into the Holyoke Range
- Norwottuck Rail Trail
- Mt. Sugarloaf State Reservation, 532 acres in size
- Mt. Toby
- Robert Frost Trail, 14.5 miles in length
- The Connecticut River
- Puffers Pond

MAP 5.5: PEDESTRIAN PATHS AND TRAILS



Source: Town of Amherst

Amherst's Leisure Services and Supplemental Education Department coordinates a wide range of classes and recreational activities.

The Mission of Amherst's Leisure Services and Supplemental Education Department (LSSE) is to cultivate social, physical, intellectual and artistic development in the Town's children, youth, and adults. It coordinates a wide range of activities and classes including cooking, health and fitness, group sports, astronomy, chess, dancing, music, art, and languages. The LSSE provides a fee reduction program for those who wish to participate but are unable to do so because of economic hardship. It has a variety of services for those with special needs such as sign language interpreters, one-on-one aids, consultation with instructors, seating or lighting adjustments, and recorded instruction on audiotape. The LSSE also publishes Leisure Times, a newsletter listing activities, programs, classes, performances and other leisure and recreation activities. Children and youth programs include summer camps, after-school programs, tutoring, and classes. The sidebar at left provides a list of the 17 LSSE activity sites in Amherst. A map showing the location of these sites can be found at www.lsse.org/Facilities/facilitymap.htm.

Other community recreation facilities are available to Amherst residents. The Cherry Hill Golf Course is a 9-hole municipally owned facility open to members and others in the community. It is dedicated to providing an open atmosphere and "a course for all." It is maintained by the Conservation Department and is used for bird watching, as well as skiing and sledding during the winter months. The Conservation Department also administers the Community Garden Project, in which small plots of land on four different sites are rented to community members for gardening purposes.

The Amherst Community Arts Center is a non-profit visual arts education center providing instruction for children, adults, and seniors. Pottery making, drawing, painting, mixed media, cartooning, sculpture, soap making, mask making, printmaking and various other art/craft classes are offered. (See <http://www.amherstarts.org/>.) A skateboard park is currently being designed for Amherst and the community is still deciding on the location.

Public school, college, and university facilities offer resources for community events and recreational activities.

There are seven Amherst Regional Public Schools (ARPS), five elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. ARPS and LSSE coordinate the rental and use of the facilities of those schools and many community events take place in the outdoor fields, gymnasium, and pool. School and Town groups may use the facilities free of charge, while other groups may rent rooms, fields, and other facilities.

The Amherst Community Aquatic Center is located at the Middle School and holds regular hours for adult lap swim, open swim, youth lessons, water aerobics, and birthday parties.

LSSE ACTIVITY SITES**Parks and Recreation Areas**

- Community Fields / War Memorial Pool
- Groff Park
- Kiwanis Park
- Mill River Recreation Area
- Plum Brook Recreation Area

Schools

- Crocker Farm Elementary
- Fort River Elementary
- Middle School
- Regional High School
- Wildwood Elementary

Other Facilities

- Bangs Community Center
- Barn Studio
- Bassett Planetarium
- Hampshire College
- Mudpie Visual Arts Center
- Museum Library
- Red Barn Music Center

Amherst benefits from having two colleges and one university in Town providing a wide range of recreational, fitness, and health facilities. Amherst College maintains the following sports and recreation facilities: Orr Rink, Davenport Squash Courts, Pratt Pool, Coolidge Cage Tennis Courts, Wolff Fitness Center, and Alumni Gymnasium. Hampshire College houses Bay Road Tennis Club at the Multi-Sport Center, which provides indoor tennis courts to the public. The college also has an enclosed 25-yard pool and a rock-climbing wall. The University of Massachusetts-Amherst offers summer gym and fitness membership to the community. Their facilities include Curry Hicks Building Pool, the Totman Building pool, gym, and fitness center, and the Boyden Building's gym, handball courts, pool, fitness center, and weight room.

There are a variety of recreation organizations in the Town.

Amherst residents are involved in a variety of recreation organizations. The Amherst Hockey Association provides supervised, recreational, and competitive hockey programs for children and young adults aged 4-17. The group serves 250 youth per year and uses the Orr Rink at Amherst College, and Mullins Center practice facility at the University of Massachusetts (www.amhersthockey.org). The Amherst Youth Soccer Association provides recreational soccer for Amherst's youth (www.amherstsoccer.org). The Berkshire Chapter of the Appalachian Mountain Club has over 3,400 members throughout Western Massachusetts (www.amcberkshire.org). The Western Massachusetts Climber's Coalition works to conserve the region's climbing environment (www.westernmacc.com/index.htm).